

## PREP

“Don’t think that this means anything. I am not really here.”

“HERE.”

It was a simple process. I could use my pencil to make these creature come to life. They existed in this nether world awaiting my blessing. My creativity was critical for this realization. It was not only a picture of the world. I was giving it vitality.

“Some people believe that I am here to save the world. I’m not doing so badly myself. But I do not have any expectations.”

“I only want a good meal. That is certainly enough for me. I simply don’t need to be with a guy who doesn’t love me. It’s not that complex.”

“Sometimes, I just want to live on a farm. At least, the animals will appreciate me.”

“I think that you might have had hopes for me. But you can’t ask something from me that I cannot give. You believed that I was integral to your story. I was going to offer you a way out. I could interpret the signs. I could put you in touch with a supernatural reality. When I interpret my dreams, I try to bring that flavor to my experience. But there’s not that much to it. I am trying to escape some kind of hideous supernatural presence, or I am finding communion with heavenly creatures. There is not much else to report. I feel as if I am on the verge of some kind of revelation. However, it is all very personal. I wish that it could be more. I wait for those moments. But they are not really there. And I am not apologetic about that. I am trying to survive.”

“The ride has been fun as long as it lasted.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“What are you looking for you?”

“What are you looking for?”

“The story is degenerating.”

“That is one way of seeing it.”

I did not want to lose track of the narrative. Mandalay was grounding my efforts. And I wanted her influence to keep on. There had been this remarkable promise.

Mandalay was meant to be representative of the final stage in this journey. She played into this role with such facility. That attribution no longer seemed to apply. Did it ever? Did Ariadne ever have a supernatural presence. Did Marchesa ever attain a higher stages of consciousness.

The culture might have implied some kind of universal consciousness. The clothes or the music might have spoken to that awareness. But no individual truly expressed that understanding. No one ever attained an altered stage of being. For a moment, each person might have aspired to this wonder. And the promise was there. It suggested so much more. It seemed to give greater artistic purpose to individual efforts. It was more this pose than any kind of practice. But the belief was rooted in a feeling of self-confidence. It seemed to point to more provocative knowledge.

There seemed to be numerous layers to this way thinking. And this artistic inspiration was further supported by a long history. The story seemed to give credibility to human experience in a profound manner. How much was really there?

This was more than submitting to traditions instilled by parents. Even Mandalay could resist these influences. She wasn't looking for a man to help her start a family. At least, that was what she seemed to imply. The culture attested to a different legacy. It gave greater motivation to simple tasks. It made people believe that their creative energies were part of an actual work of art. In some ways, no one should be faulted for that belief.

If Mandalay had these extraordinary powers, it would have only seemed natural from her background. It was as if she was good at picking winners. But that didn't always result in the best social interactions. She could suffer these experiences in the hopes that it would all work itself out. Even if it didn't sort itself out, she seemed to have a superior vantage point, and that added to her chosen nature. It enabled her to hold out through some of the worst situations. Would that be enough?

For the moment, this was Mandalay's story. And she was going to perfect her version. She wanted an audience, but she seemed to find fault with each audience member. She was playing to this ideal in her mind. And she added to that representation. It made her seem almost clairvoyant. That was her true charm. Each word had a sense of revelation, even if there was an element of nonsense in any particular pronouncement. She just needed to faster at anyone else in digesting all these elements.

She was entirely a product of this culture. But she was doing her best to take apart each component and put it back in her own way. She didn't want anyone to fuss over this alchemy, and that itself made her own vision more volatile. There was no enough urgency to sustain a great artistic perspective. She did not have a Sistine Chapel in mind. Perhaps, she would never have that kind of ambition.

She might give added impact to these small examples of artistic expression. She did enough to consolidate her environment. She was shutting out any extraneous elements. It was more about winning her body back for herself. There might have been a hope that she could move the cosmos. She took it for what it was. She held together her little piece of the world, even as people criticized her.

At moments, she may have taken on more profound questions about her life. She may have teetered at the edge of consciousness. She may have been pushing a more persistent awareness. There was almost this grand gesture that gave meaning to her endeavors. However, that view was more the product of the observer. For her part, there was not always this constant effort to shake existence to the core.

Maybe, she was torn by this grand gesture. It was almost as if someone reserved this important question to ask her. And she might have stayed awake at night wondering what she was supposed to be figuring out. But this burden could seem like total nonsense to her. She would finally recognize that none of this mattered. But there would still be this enormous hollow that still weighed her down. Something did not balance. She was somewhere that she was not supposed to be.

None of these musings would lead to a greater consciousness. She sought revelation to reassure that she had nothing to worry about. She was not going to lead a movement for the transformation of humanity. She was excellent as a critic. She could break down the weaknesses in any of these grand philosophies. But she was not there to offer her own version. And she awaited the breaking down of this outlook.

She might have been negotiating her role in this epic design. There was almost an obligation to which she would never admit. But it stopped at that. She was not a seer. She was not a prophet. She was not predicting future liberation.

She was not abdicating her position. She never really believed that she was the ultimate representative of the new epoch. She questioned whether such an individual could emerge. Nevertheless, she seemed to understand all the signs. And this added to her aura. She could offer the guidance. If it was the end of an era, it was because there was no alternative.

How could she be such an adept witness of the culture, while she admitted that it was impossible for these moments to coalesce into a sustained realization? All these precedents spoke to such a manifestation. Everything moved in that direction. There seemed to be sources that gave coherence to the present moment.

The artist never recognized the inevitability that these efforts would fail to establish any clarity. In fact, they seemed to direct the individual towards a lasting revelation. There could even be something self-destructive in this recognition. She saw that. Sometimes, she found affection in these gestures. There seemed to be a system. Then it all seemed to dissipate. It could all be about nostalgia.

She was not the maker, but she understood where everything fit. And that seemed to be all that was needed. Could the artist ever gain greater understanding? This view reinforced the belief that the work of art was only a synthesis of other acts of creation. There was no sense that there was a personal attachment that drove the process. It was almost as if creativity was nothing but this great filing system. And the system would reveal its products one by one.

This outlook seemed to enshrine the role of the audience. There would be no work without this communication. But the fan always had a different vantage point. This view might have emphasized the correctness of the observer's insight. The individual might be adept at criticizing the efforts of the creator. This could include isolating any false moves. But that acumen could never substitute for real creativity. At best, it might serve a cheap reproduction.

Mandalay was doing enough to arrange her world to create an overall change. This gave her pleasure. She was moving in the right direction. Over time, her gestures might have become more authoritative. She could have taken flight with her observations. She already had stories to tell. And she wanted to pull it all together. She did not have ideology. But she had policy.

Could she find the occasion to separate herself from this chaos to find the pretext to collect all these gestures into a single motive? Would the combined energy create a text? There were moments when she wanted everything to be more elegant. This was more an appetite than a philosophy. She was not going to pretend that it was something else.

Everything spoke to that same feeling of destiny. You could see it when you jumped up to dance to your favorite song. Despite the coherence of all these gestures, none of it implied a more insistent revelation. It was absurd. I had spent all this time trying to catalogue all these exemplars. And you had made your own efforts with your playlists. You were creating an inevitable history. You were the sage, who could explain how it was all put together. This was not a committed effort at creating a timeline. It was more of a convenience to put everything in place. These were all memories. There was nothing more in this recollection.

Your efforts had been so exhaustive. And your personality seemed to match this same level of engagement. That did not diminish a sense of futility. Did any of this matter? When

things seemed to have this sense of mass, you would wash your hands of the project. You were only an occasional witness.

Why did you refuse to take this endeavor any further? You could see that concern in others. They weren't only making decisions for themselves. Someone else was speaking to them even when they made the smallest decisions. This could be a pair of boots, or a new jacket. It wasn't only a sense of proportion. The word was out.

For that brief moment, you could exercise greatness. But you understood the risks if you tried to make more of it. No one else would be able to have that sense of breadth. You had already exercised your powers. Perhaps, you were your own worst critic. Or you would see something that would prevent you from realizing your inspiration. Everything would explode in that wonder. The world could marvel.

Your collective awareness was stymied by your individual enthusiasm. It wasn't so much cynicism. But these efforts spoke to the limited effectiveness of a political program. This was not really your forte. Your disenchantment with traditional institutions could degenerate in your bouts of radicalism. Everything was far too extravagant ever to result in an actual program. You could just as easily be swayed by the appeals of the dominant culture. Everything was too subjective in this analysis.

That flaw might have been more apparent in the actions of others. You would recover just enough so that you did not seem telegraph your actual intentions. That seemed to create the needed reassurance.

"Hey, why did you come back?"

"I came back to tell you that I loved you."

"This is not something that you can come back and say."

"You don't like me. You like the idea of me. You want to go home and write about me. But you do not want to be with me. You have all these women who tell you that they love you."

"You are the only one that matters."

"If I mattered, you would pay for my ice cream."

"I am paying."

"You want me to encourage your mischief. Then you can blame me for it."

"Why do you have trouble expressing real emotions?"

"Only one thing is different."

"Who else is at the table?"

"Who do you want to be at the table?"

It was Mandalay's moment.

"I do not have enough money to afford any of this."

"Who does?"

"This is the moment of revelation."

"Beyond the dream."

"This is the real stuff."

"I own it."

"What does it mean when people say that they own things?"

"What are you showing, and what are you hiding?"

"I am tossing everything that I own down from a tower."

“I do not even know what that means.”

“You need to know.”

“That is not leaving enough time to do what needs to get done.”

“You are just like all the rest.”

“I do not need any of you.”

“How is talking?”

“This is how we all feel.”

“This was a special privilege.”

“I need to leave the show.”

“What is that all about?”

“I handed in everything that was due.”

“You guys are all the same.”

“It is harder for me.”

“It is so much worse than that.”

“Then the magic fades away.”

“It does.”

“What are you writing?”

“That girl Julie, I am her nemesis. I can save her. I can bring her back to life. But she is not a good person. I know these things. She is rolling on the ground at fast food place complaining how much she has eaten.”

“I like a few of the songs.”

“I want to see all of you.”

“What are you saving for?”

“What do you want to save for?”

“The savior said do not worry about money.”

“You need to have the finer things. You need to plan for the future.”

“I am sitting right in the center of things.”

“None of this is going to change.”

“None of this is pure.”

“This is not going to change anything.”

“I am going to make the move on her.”

“You spend like there is no tomorrow.”

“There is no tomorrow.”

“I realize that is the point.”

“You are destroying me.”

“What is this about?”

“Honestly, this is a better deal.”

“You got tired of her.”

“Boys.”

“That is sufficient for me?”

“I can explain it.”

“I am sick at heart.”

“Is this something that you really want?”

“The story is moving along.”

“I will find every fault.”

“I am laughing.”

“You are laughing at me.”

“Will you understand what it is in the end?”

“What should it be?”

“Pay me my money.”

“What is this really about?”

“This is not me. But I realize what is going on. I heard about it in the bathroom.”

“I don’t want to some ugly guy to sit with me. Then all these ugly guys would think the have a right to sit with me. But I am pretty. I don’t want ugly guys to think that they could sit with me.”

“This is the justification of the master race.”

“If that is what it is, I will take it for what it is.”

“I know what I want. I want a cute guy. I want a ten. I want Tarzan. He will lead me in the jungle.”

“That story is a rewrite of the colonial invasion. Tarzan was stranded in the jungle due to a plane crash.”

“What kind of music will accompany this kind of life.”

“You tell me.”

“Who is the other man?”

“The one who came in with you.”

“I do not need any more men.”

“I felt as if we had escaped.”

“And we ended up right back where we had been.”

“You should have gone home.”

“You are destroying it for everyone else.”

“I bought these cute shoes.”

“I can do anything that they can do.”

“I can do more.”

“What are you telling the world?”

“I did it twice.”

“I am not perfect.”

“That did not taste right.”

“I do not feel right.”

“You are so casual.”

“This is a dress rehearsal.”

“None of it works.”

“This is going to be a big production.”

“There are no ideas.”

“What is going on in there?”

“I cannot hold on.”

“Hang on. You will get an award.”

“This is it.”  
“You need to offer.”  
“I am not trying to take advantage of things.”  
“Take advantage.”  
“I am running quickly.”  
“That is all done for my benefit.”  
“What do you want to tell me?”  
“Welcome to the museum.”  
“No one really understands.”  
“Does anyone really care?”  
“The caring woke me up.”  
“There are some important things happening here.”  
“Give me an example.”  
“I only have examples.”  
“I should not have jumped up.”  
“What do you want to hear?”  
“Nothing.”  
“That is perfect.”  
“As good as good can be.”  
“That could never be me.”  
“You are not as ambitious as I am.”  
“I was going to pull out my check book.”  
“I cannot keep track.”  
“I cannot explain it.”  
“I DO NOT WANT TO HEAR THE EXPLANATION.”  
“Of course, you do not.”  
“What is really going on back there?”  
“We are finding love?”  
“Will that do it?”  
“I knew that I would be shaken from my slumber.”  
“There are different kinds of preparation.”  
“What do you want to do.”  
“I have been here before.”  
“He once had money.”  
“LOSER, BUY ME A DRINK.”  
“It will sort itself out.”  
“Or it will not sort itself out.”  
“And you will leave.”  
“You will all leave.”  
“I think that it is genius.”  
“You are another asshole , who is in a hurry.”  
“You better hope that your crew has you shit.”  
“They do.”

“I cannot say anything else.”  
“I once had it all figured out.”  
“Now, no one will ever figure it out.”  
“You broke it.”  
“This is pure crap.”  
“What happens next.”  
“I am not even on the bus.”  
“Here are the chicken tenders.”  
“You need to include so many additives.”  
“We will all meet back here.”  
“Whatever you say.”  
“Can anyone be that ridiculous and have anything smart to say?”  
“I am someone’s sister.”  
“I know what you all say.”  
“You have control over a whole lot of nothing.”  
“Or even less.”  
“We have three points of light.”  
“And you are one of them.”  
“Do you want what I have?”  
“Who brought me back here?”  
“You could sort it out for me.”  
“Why doesn’t she get a job instead of rolling around on the floor of a fast food place.”  
“And you think that this makes any difference.”  
“It might.”  
“It might.”  
“I will be much better tomorrow.”  
“You will.”  
“I will.”  
“We still have time.”  
“Not much.”  
“You are finally here.”  
“This is some variation of freak.”  
“I am staring.”  
“I do not understand.”  
“You are not supposed to get this.”  
“You are excited.”  
“Thanks for coming.”  
“None of them will ever know.”  
“That is more than a little honest.”  
“Who is listening?”  
“They are all brilliant.”  
“Do you see what I am doing?”  
Mandalay would sort it all out.



“And I could leave for good.”  
 “For good.”  
 “Will that ever be something important.”  
 “Are you serious?”  
 “Honestly.”  
 “This is an act of genius.”  
 “How many people in the world?”  
 “Julie, Mandalay, the actor, the listener.”  
 “The lawmakers.”  
 “Some guy named Nate.”  
 “None of this will be anything.”  
 “I am trying to be nice.”  
 “Everyone is pretending.”  
 “I do not even know who this is.”  
 “There is a snack waiting for me.”  
 “I need to move around.”  
 “Move as quickly as you can.”  
 “What is going on here.”  
 “I want to pencil in the right amount.”  
 “You are keeping score. Do not cheat.”  
 “Who do you need to talk to?”  
 “I am too sick to explain it.”  
 “I do not have that kind of free time.”  
 “Did you ever walk with a zombie?”  
 “And I am thinking that this guy thinks his music is fantastic, and he can barely read a book, and I wonder what else he has going for him.”  
 “I do not want to be jealous.”  
 “I am not here.”  
 “Here.”  
 “That is very ridiculous.”  
 “I carry the weight.”  
 “I am really going nowhere.”  
 “As a woman, I feel exploited. You are trying to take everything that makes me who I am. Another man. And you pretend that none of this is happening.”  
 “Is this really a conversation.”  
 “Why would you want to talk to me?”  
 “I do not know.”  
 “This is pure genius.”  
 “This guy is pathetic.”  
 “I am going to tell you that you are everything.”  
 “You better be a genius.”  
 “I am floating in it.”  
 “That is beautiful.”

“This is destroying me.”  
“It is not destroying me.”  
“I cannot explain it.”  
“I cannot explain it.”  
“I am as close as can be.”  
“There is not other option.”  
“I have one favor to ask of everyone.”  
“I want you to make it happen.”  
“She is my mother.”  
“It all makes sense.”  
“It all makes sense.”  
“Let this be a warning.”  
“I am only hearing the echo.”  
“This is going to happen all the time.”  
“It will.”  
“This is useless.”  
“The pipes are leaking.”  
“This goes back to the Empire.”  
“Which one?”  
“And you believe that they know things.”  
“I do not want to waste my time.”  
“She has this all in tow.”  
“How does that work?”  
“I work with what I have.”  
“I have what I work with.”  
“Where does this go?”  
“The weather is perfect.”  
“I will get out of here.”  
“What is actually going on here.”  
“That is wonderful.”  
“I want to participate.”  
“Order whatever is on the menu.”  
“I do not want any more pain.”  
“I am trying to focus.”  
“Focus.”  
“I was never like this.”  
“You must have been.”  
“They are poisoning me.”  
“This is not Mandalay.”  
“Dystopian vision.”  
“What dose that mean?”  
“That is impossible.”  
“That is worse than I recognize.”

“This has nothing to do with me.”

“What am I listening to?”

“The end of time.”

“You cannot make excuses.”

“There is an obligation.”

“We have a code.”

“Someone violated it.”

“What is really going on?”

“It says who we are.”

“And that is all that I need.”

“I see a selfish performance. Someone who manipulates the political situation to maintain privilege.”

“You need to work harder.”

“I need to take a breath.”

“Take a breath.”

“You are not even in the room.”

“I need to tell you something.”

“You are the only one who can help me.”

“I can help you.”

“I guess I know who got the brains.”